

Luke 10:38-42

The Good Portion

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This month our theme is What Does the Bible say about Family Values? I have been anticipating this theme for months. The reason it seems important to me is because so many people in our church and community have heard about the biblical view of family values from the religious right. What we have heard has been dogmatic, and uncompromising. When folks on the religious right use the Bible and quote certain passages to support their views many more moderate people of faith feel like we have been shut down. We feel separated from the Bible and suddenly unsure of our own scripture. When people on the religious right quote scripture to support their views, they seem so certain; it may not sound right to most of us, but we second-guess ourselves. You have heard all of these arguments. You've read them in the newspaper; you've hear them from neighbors, your relatives or the news.

1. They say "The Bible says that marriage is between one man and one woman."
2. They say that the man is the head of the household and that women must be subservient. It is God's plan that men rule the household as Christ heads the church.

The sad thing to me is that when most of us hear people talk about the Bible we stop debating. We worry that the Bible really does say these things. We assume these folks must be right because they sound so self-assured. But today I want to set the record straight on the Bible and Family Values. I want you to hear a much more comprehensive view of what the Bible really says when it comes to family values. I am hoping that some of these ideas could be talking points for you.

When we started this sermon series two weeks ago Peter Miano, the Executive Director of the Society for Biblical Studies, began his sermon with a story that took place in Jerusalem. He was in the

shop of a Palestinian woman whom he had known for many years. Some American tourists were in the shop and they were talking openly and loudly about the Palestinians. Their comments are unbelievably insensitive. But these people said, “These Arabs dress so funny, and a friend added, “They smell too.” Peter was mortified and reached over to apologize to her friend who owned the shop. She replied, “We know these Americans. They take the Bible literally but they don’t take the bible seriously. When I heard this story 2 weeks ago I was angry at the ugly Americans. My first response was to distance myself. I wanted to say, in this church we don’t take the Bible literally but we do take it seriously. For the most part that is true. But more and more I think the religious right only claims to take the Bible literally. They pick and choose which verses they want to take seriously and ignore the rest. Let’s look more carefully at the passages.

What does the Bible really say about Family Values?

1. Is marriage only between one man and one woman? In the Bible marriage was a contract made between two men – one was looking for a wife and the other had a daughter to sell. Many men arranged to have their young daughters married as part of land deals, or to suit their tribal ambitions. Children were betrothed when they were very young and often sent to their husbands as soon as they came of age at puberty. Wives were property. That is the reason for the 10th commandment – Do not covet your neighbors’ wife or livestock or any other property that belongs to your neighbor. If people coveted their neighbor’s wives or livestock, they would fight over these things.
 - a. The unusual wife who somehow gained her husband’s attention or respect was very powerful for a woman. It was considered a great grace that Esther’s husband loved her; even so if she failed to show him respect, or even interrupted him, she was in deep trouble and could be beheaded.

- b. Adam and Eve were never married. Neither were Sarah and Abraham, in the way that we think of marriage today.
 - c. The Bible never says anything about one man or one woman. Most men in the Hebrew Bible took many wives. Jacob is a good example; he had his 13 children with 2 wives and 2 maids, and only loved one of the four. Kings had harems and Solomon had 1000 wives.
2. The Bible does say lots of things that we reject today.
- a. Women could be stoned to death for adultery, but the men caught in adultery were seldom blamed or held responsible. In the rare cases where a man was held responsible, he owed money to the woman's husband for damages to his property. We don't think this is a good family value.
 - b. When Abraham travelled to Egypt with his wife Sarah he passed her off as his sister and gave Sarah to the Pharaoh as a consort, because he gained power through her. We don't consider that to be a good family value.
 - c. Parents were allowed to beat their children or sell their children into slavery if they needed cash. We don't consider this to be a good family value.

In a world where women were subjugated by the men in their households, the one person in the Bible who really changed the status of women and the view of families was Jesus Christ.

Today's story in Luke 10 is the story of Mary and Martha. Martha is the hostess for the meal and she may be a Martha but she is no Martha Stewart. Right in the middle of the event she interrupted Jesus to complain about her sister. Mary had been sitting on the floor at Jesus' feet listening. Even now in the Middle East or in most homes around the world, no women sit with the men while there is food to be served. Certainly it was an unorthodox thing to do 2000 years ago.

In the original Greek, this story is connected to the story about the disciples in the boat with Jesus during the storm. Those disciples rushed to the back of the boat and woke Jesus, saying –“Don’t you care if we drown. Do something”. Martha confronts Jesus using the same words “Don’t you see what is happening here? Don’t you notice that Mary is not helping? Don’t you care that the boat of social norms is being upset while we gather for dinner here. Set things right Lord. Put Mary in her place.

Most men would have pushed Mary into the kitchen, physically or abused her verbally or shamed her publically. But that is not what Jesus did. Jesus supported Mary. Jesus refuted Martha’s plea, and went after Martha. He tells Martha that Mary has chosen the better portion. She has joined the men and is learning about faith. Jesus revolutionized the role of women that day.

Jesus treated women with respect. He spoke to women, unheard of. He ate with women- unheard of. He interrupted his meetings with the disciples to greet some mothers and take their children on his lap- chastising the disciples when they grew impatient- unheard of. Jesus told them that unless they became like children they could not enter God’s kingdom. We are used to these words today but when Jesus said them, they were subversive. Jesus allowed women to touch his garments. He included women among his inner circle of disciples; the fact that they are named at all is proof of this. Women mattered so much to the early church that every gospel account of the resurrection includes a mention that the risen Christ appeared first to women like Mary Magdalene.

Women assumed roles of leadership in the early Christian Church. There is no other reason that Paul would start his letters with greetings to these women. Lydia and Priscilla figure prominently in the church at Philippi. It is clear in Acts that the churches depended on the economic support of affluent widows. They supported the house-churches. Later letters attributed to Paul, told women to be subservient to their husbands presumably because the Christians were under so much pressure from

Rome due to the unusual freedom they allowed women to have. Those passages that urge the subjugation of women fly in the face of the clear example of Jesus.

Last week, we celebrated Bible Sunday and gave new Bibles to our kindergarteners and fourth graders. We have some great pictures on our church's Facebook page of children talking to Rev. Jamie about their new Bibles as they sit on the playground last Sunday. In the sermon last week I talked about how the Bible stories depict real families, not perfect ones. I love the fact that we give bibles out to our children because I want them to know what this book says. I want them to see the wisdom here which is so much deeper than the superficial things some people read here. And I want them to know this book well, so that they can think things through for themselves.

For all the different messages in our Bible some things remain very clear.

The Bible is told from the perspective of the Hebrew people, a nation who knew the shame and sadness of discrimination. The Bible says a lot of things but it is not a book that promotes hatred. Not really. The stories are told by people who knew persecution and what it means to be the victims of bigotry. Running across the many different books are clear themes about tolerance and the triumph of compassion. Overall, the Bible tells a story about how to treat the least and the lost because the folks who were writing had firsthand experience of this condition. It is a story of the triumph of love, God's love for us and our attempt to live with peace and justice. When people use our Bible to promote hate, whether we win the debate or not, we can take some assurance from the fact that they are missing the point.

What Jesus said in Luke 10 rings true today. Whatever debate you find yourself in, step back and think about what is the **good portion. What makes the most sense? What God wants for us is the good portion in life. Often the good portion is the arc that bends toward, compassion for the outsider, love with integrity, and justice for the underdog.**